



## HOW ARE UNIVERSITIES PLANNING TO TACKLE EMISSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH FLYING AND FOOD?

*This briefing note is intended as a resource for university sustainability teams and anyone interested in emissions reduction in workplaces and higher education.*

### KEY POINTS

- Emissions from catering and business travel are substantial components of an institution's emission profile. The climate emergency, and net zero framings adopted widely across the Higher Education sector require that all organisations use their full range of influence to rapidly and substantially reduce emissions in these areas.
- It is action, not plans, that reduce emissions, and target setting, data collection, analysis and action planning should not replace or delay action. We know that meat consumption and air travel are emissions hotspots for the sector and we know there are actions we should take now to reduce them.
- Actions should identify, nurture and embed academic practices that enable inclusive low-carbon careers by engaging with the cultural and material conditions that presently enable high-carbon activities. For example, addressing underlying reasons for travel, and the constraints (finances and time) that make flying frequent.
- Establishing robust targets and monitoring processes can support sector-wide decarbonisation, and would benefit from consensus across HE institutions and governing bodies. For air travel, absolute and time limited targets to reduce emissions or flights are appropriate. For food, targets should focus on achieving a volumetric reduction in the weight of meat served and waste produced.



Centre for **Climate Change**  
and **Social Transformations**

CAST is a global hub for understanding the role of people in shaping a positive low-carbon future. Based at Cardiff University, our additional core partners are University of Bath, University of East Anglia, University of Manchester, University of York and the charity Climate Outreach.

**Tyndall**°Centre  
for Climate Change Research

This briefing was produced in collaboration with the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. The Tyndall Centre is a partnership of universities bringing together researchers from the social and natural sciences and engineering to develop sustainable responses to climate change.

## Introduction

Climate Emergency declarations and Net Zero commitments require that organisations renew their efforts to reduce emissions and use their full range of influence to effect change. This analysis focussed on two particularly emissions-intensive aspects of university business; long-distance business travel and catering (specifically meat-consumption).

These are substantial contributors to the carbon footprint of universities (and many other organisations), but are typically under-accounted for in carbon management planning. We aimed to understand the extent to which university plans and actions in these areas are commensurate with climate emergency declarations, and make recommendations to support setting sufficiently ambitious targets and actions.

## Why food and flying?

The UK's Committee on Climate Change recognises aviation and agriculture as sectors where it is very challenging to reduce emissions. Mobility scholars have shown that aeromobility is deeply embedded in the institutional culture of HE, with individual career progression and institutional standing linked to international mobility.

Similarly, for meat-eating, coordinated developments across production-consumption systems sustain meat-heavy diets, and this is no less true in workplace cafeterias and catering. Subsequently, reducing emissions requires the reconfiguration of professional practices and institutional policies to enable low-carbon transformation.

Many universities omit, or only partially account for, business travel and food within their carbon management reporting. However, the importance of emissions in these areas is widely recognised and there is evidence of pioneer institutions setting targets and taking action to reduce emissions in these areas. Across the sector more action is required to reduce emissions. To support sector-wide action, this briefing note focusses on targets and actions that should be implemented to rapidly and substantially reduce emissions in these two areas, and contribute towards a low-carbon workplace culture. Illustrative examples of good practice are given.

## Results and recommendations

### Targets to support decarbonisation

Few universities have specific, quantified targets for emissions reduction in food and flying, and of those that do, several were relative (e.g. per member of staff) which continues to allow growth in emissions.

**METHOD:** This study analysed the publicly available policies of 66 UK universities to identify strategies related to long-distance business travel and catering.

For each university, documents including Carbon Management Plans and Annual Reports, Travel Plans and Sustainable Food Policies were downloaded, catalogued and reviewed.

**SAMPLE:** The sample included a mix of institutions by size, classification (i.e. Russell Group and Post-1992 establishments) and their performance in the People and Planet league, and also included all 29 universities that had declared a climate emergency (at March 2020).

[A full summary of this review is available in the supplementary data associated with the paper.](#)

## Flying

Absolute targets are needed for air travel (i.e. 'reduce number of business-related flights or emissions by X') and a time frame should be specified. It is only by reducing the number of flights and distance flown that emissions from flying be reduced in the near-term, and targets should reflect this.

The HE sector should identify a rate of emissions reduction that reflects the scale and pace of change needed, and determine the appropriate contribution of different institutions to help identify where action is most urgently required.

## Food

Obtaining data to robustly estimate catering-related emissions is difficult, and while it is commendable that a university would seek to map catering emissions, this should not prevent evidence-based action to reduce emissions.

Future guidance on target-setting and monitoring for the HE sector should focus on achieving a volumetric reduction in meat and dairy and shifting from high-carbon meat (beef and lamb) and dairy, to lower greenhouse gas meats (e.g. pork, poultry and fish) and plant-based alternatives as well as reducing waste.

This could be accompanied by other actions e.g. to reduce food miles, however there is now a substantial evidence base that shows the importance of transitioning away from a highly meat based diet.

Where targets are set, they should focus on achieving an absolute reduction in the volume of meat provided through catering services. As for business travel, this target should be time limited to ensure emissions reduce quickly as well as substantially.

### **It is actions, not plans, that reduce emissions.**

Business travel and catering are complex aspects of workplace routine; however, there is now evidence that identifies clear objectives for policy and action in this area. Target setting, data analysis and action planning should not replace or delay action to reduce emissions.

## Positive action to reduce business travel emissions

Ultimately, a model of academia dependent on aeromobility is not only high-carbon, but also excludes academics on restricted visas, disabled academics and those with care commitments that prevent long-distance travel. The view that air travel is necessary in an academic career is not universal, and the link between academic mobility and career can impact negatively on those who reject this culture or are less able to participate. For universities that want to achieve a sustainable and inclusive workplace, disrupting the model that depends on aeromobility would be a clear progressive step forwards.

To reduce business travel emissions, universities need to enable staff and students to avoid as much travel as possible, particularly flying, and reduce the distance and frequency of individual trips. When a trip is necessary, maximise the number of engagements per trip and reduce the number of travelers. The actions below summarise positive actions identified at UK universities.

### Positive actions identified

**Review and define 'essential travel'.** Providing a definition of essential travel can help to reduce travel, whilst recognising that some travel is likely to continue. For example, the University of Oxford propose to review the use of video conferencing for exams and interviews, activities where specialists would otherwise fly in for short visits. To be inclusive any definition of essential travel should recognise differentiated travel needs. For example, early career staff, staff with care responsibilities care outside of work, and disabled staff have different needs for travel, and different constraints on their ability to travel by low-carbon modes.

Travel hierarchies, such as the [University of Oxford's 'avoid travel, reduce travel, travel without flying, fly when there are no alternatives'](#), and decision trees like the [Tyndall Centre's](#) provide useful guidance to determine which trips are necessary, and how to maximise their value.

**Make train travel the default for journeys within a specified distance.** Several universities prohibit domestic flights and some (e.g. Universities of Brighton and Greenwich) propose eliminating air travel to destinations that can be reached by high-speed rail such as Eurostar.

**Grant additional time (and funding) for long distance rail travel.** Long distance rail is the least emission intensive way of travelling, but requires more time and is often expensive. Universities should not only encourage rail travel, but support staff by appropriately costing additional time and adequate subsistence to cover alternatives to air-travel within grants, and guidance should prioritise low-carbon travel for internal funds (e.g. PhD student and external examiner travel expenses). Similarly, Universities should communicate that taking a slower, possibly more expensive route is expected, supporting a wider conversation about low-carbon travel within academic networks.

**Focus on reducing the trips of frequent fliers.** A targeted approach has the potential to make a significant difference quickly. King's College London found that the top 1% of fliers by emissions produce more emissions than the bottom 50%. Focusing on frequent fliers may also help to identify underlying reasons for flying that can support wider change.

**Require additional permissions for flights.** This is an effective way of disrupting habitual actions to reconfigure tacit understandings of 'how we do things'. It also incentivises lower carbon travel modes by ensuring flights are less convenient to book than rail, and gives line managers/budget holders an opportunity to support lower emissions alternatives.

**Restrict business travel flights.** Business class seats have more emissions attributed to them than economy class seats, so prohibiting business and first-class flights is one way to reduce emissions (and ensure a responsible use of public funds) that many universities are implementing (e.g. University of the Arts, London and University of Manchester). In addition, the comfort of these classes of travel makes short and frequent trips more appealing and therefore risks tipping the balance toward defining more activities as 'worth the travel'. Exceptional circumstances (e.g. medical need) may require business class seats, this should be written into the guidance on essential travel.

**Train staff involved in booking travel and/or request additional support from external travel booking providers.** Travel booking systems often prioritise flights, and many staff have become familiar with booking flights as the default. Removing additional administrative/process barriers to booking train travel requires that staff involved in trip booking are able to book train travel easily. Investing in software that identifies routes and tickets can support low carbon travel.

**Maximise the value of a trip.** Increase the number of engagements per trip, and reduce the number of travelers.

**Lobbying for sector wide change.** Universities' attempts to disrupt a culture of flying would benefit from the support of other organisations (e.g. regulators and research funding bodies). They should call on these organisations to support action, and work with organisations already taking positive action (for example, see EUAC's Climate Action Toolkit for the Higher Education Sector and the Wellcome Trust's sustainable travel policy). In these collaborations, emphasis should be placed on action to reduce emissions and share successes, rather than further review, data collection and analysis.

**Review university policies for contradictions.** Internationalisation strategy, probation and promotions documents, etc. can (tacitly or explicitly) require long-distance travel. To ensure that staff can see and follow successful career paths that do not involve high levels of air travel, these institutional level strategies and policies should be reviewed regularly and success stories from colleagues celebrated.

**Develop transparent guidance for exceptional circumstances.** Sometimes people need to travel long distances quickly and/or at short notice, and on these occasions there may be few alternatives to flying. Guidance on exceptional circumstances should clearly explain conditions where flying may be accepted. Again, exceptional circumstances should also account for diversity and equality issues.

## Positive action to reduce emissions from food

There are many different sustainability concerns linked to food. With respects to climate change, there is now good evidence to support the transitions towards less meat intensive diets. Achieving this requires that plant-based meals are abundant and affordable. Additionally, universities need to recognise their role in influencing what is generally, publicly, and normatively understood to be 'proper food', implementing measures that go beyond menu redesign and informational cues to embed sustainable routines in the workplace.

In practice, this requires that organisations consider ways of enabling experimentation with less emissions intensive diets. This could include meat-free days, for example, but could also entail measures to make low-emission practices commonplace (e.g. a policy of plant-based catering as default). Such actions are presently under-represented in sustainability policies.

### Positive actions identified:

**Replace meat with plant-based alternatives.** Many universities have general goal to increase the availability of plant-based meals. Ambition in this areas needs to increase, and overall the aim should be to displace meat, particularly beef and lamb, from the menu. Some universities have gone as far as 'banning beef' (e.g. Goldsmiths and Cambridge), entirely removing beef and lamb from the menu to create space for plant-based proteins.

**Make plant-based catering the default.** University events are an opportunity to showcase plant-based meals that an individual might not select. Making plant-based meals the default for event catering therefore not only reduces emissions but also creates a space for staff and visitors to try something different. For example, the University of Manchester's Methods@Manchester has a meat-free catering policy for events, and University College London has a department level 'Powered by Plants' initiative that provides vegetarian catering.

**Sharing spaces.** Food practices are sociable practices, and creating spaces for staff and students to share plant-based meals, recipes, and cooking lessons can support wider experimentation with plant-based eating. Examples include Lancaster Universities 'Edible campus', which showcases ingredients and makes them accessible to staff. Several student unions host cooking corners, inviting students to demonstrate and share their meals with others. Recognising the university as a sociable space, and supporting platforms for staff and students to share plant-based cooking and meals with others could help to increase uptake of plant-based meals.

**Reviewing contracts for contradictions.** Many universities have contracts with external catering providers, and these contracts need regular review to ensure they embed similar principals for emissions reduction. Sharing experiences of excellent plant-based catering contractors with others in the sector can help to increase their share of business. Similarly, many contractors are taking action to reduce emissions associated with their business, universities can show their support by ensuring their procurement policies prioritise contractors who are taking action to reduce provision of meat-based meals.

**Experiment at sub-university level, then share learning and scale up.** Many universities have more ambitious actions ongoing at a sub-university level. These are not well connected to carbon management planning and monitoring. All actions should be reported within university-level frameworks to allow experiences to be shared and extended.

## Conclusions

This review found evidence of some universities involving themselves in a more substantial restructuring of working routines to reduce emissions associated with flying and food. These aspects of university decarbonisation suggest the beginnings of a more systemic approach to sustainability than has typically been observed. However, action in these two areas is not yet widespread and there is a need for greater effort to extend and stabilise low-carbon routines. In order to do so, existing research suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the connections between academic routines and wider developments both within and outside of HE. In the case of flying, assumptions regarding the ongoing international expansion of research and teaching activities that require physical presence must be challenged. In the case of food, there is a need for wider recognition of the role universities play – as caterers – in maintaining demand for emissions-intensive meals.

Higher education's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that rapid, deep and widespread changes are possible in higher education. The reorganisation of campus activity when we return to our workplaces/ universities present significant opportunities to establish new, more sustainable, practices.

## References

[The full paper is available to read for free here.](#)

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